

Creativity: Getting to the “aha-moment”

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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May 2016

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2016

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Abstract

Creativity is a concept that has been researched time and again, but seldom does it relate personal anecdotes to its content. With my thesis, I made a 13-minute documentary in which I interviewed seven people from numerous fields about how they get to their ideas that resulted in several surprising and entertaining responses. I chose representatives who were both students and professors from creative writing, social studies and art education, telecommunications, and acting in the hopes that such a diverse group of people would incite unique and interesting conclusions, which proved to be successful. In the beginning, I introduced the topic with a voice-over and hand-drawn stop-motion illustrations, which I used throughout the film to show the abstract concepts presented by my subjects. The body of my thesis explores five main questions: "What's your method for creating?", "If I were to hook you up to a heart monitor during the creative process, what would it look like?", "Do you use outside stimuli (such as caffeine) to boost your creativity?", "How does interacting with others affect your process?", and "Why do you create?" At the end, I listed four methods I gathered from the interviews for the audience to take note of the next time they create. My goal for this thesis is to provide a tool for generating ideas that anyone can use during creative process.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I'd like to thank Tim Berg for four years of mind-bending, eye-opening, and game-changing education. Without him, I wouldn't know half as much about the Socratic method, New York culture, Beatles trivia, or myself. He has pushed me to become a more inquisitive and introspective human being and I am eternally grateful for his consistently positive presence.

Anna Wiegand also deserves much recognition. Through the ups and downs of making this thesis, she has been there to console me, motivate me, and bake me brownies. My mental health would be out the window without her support.

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone who took part in this documentary. Dom Caristi, Mike Prater, Jill Christman, Kelsey Johnson, Abi Mitchell, Briana Lisak, and Daniel Brout provided thoughtful and captivating material for me to work with, and I couldn't have done this project without their enthusiasm and flexibility. Sadly, due to technical reasons, Ryan Murray and Lisa Rubenstein did not make it into the final product, but their time and generosity is invaluable to me.

Author's Statement

In the era of standardized testing, mindless blockbusters, and endless social media posts, I wanted to promote the value of creativity and show how people from different fields get to their aha-moments through visual storytelling. It's important to realize that there is not just one foolproof method to making something, and there is so much to learn from others. For my thesis, I made a documentary that opens up a dialogue about the methods, challenges, and misconceptions of creativity that the audience will hopefully be able to apply to their own lives. It's not just interviews and it's not just anecdotes; it's a combination of both to make something that I hope will be a tool for anyone creative – which means anyone.

Coming up with an idea for my thesis was a creative process in itself. It started last semester as a very different animal. I was convinced that the main motivation of my thesis would be to preach the utility and genius of the Socratic Method, but when my advisor posed the question, "Do you care more about the Method, or the aha-moment it inspires?" I realized my real passion was learning about any and all methods to create. I think this stems from my own unique path – I typically get my best ideas when I'm in a place out of my comfort zone. For some reason, this uneasiness fuels my imagination and allows me to let loose some of my best ideas. I wanted to see how people from different backgrounds, age groups, ethnicities, sexualities, and professions differed, while also noting their similarities. By tracking the things that they had in common, I hoped to show something that links everyone – no matter where they come from or what they do. I'll admit, this last part was a bit ambitious, and it was one of the less successful goals I had. I didn't know what I was trying to find in common, and I think that target got lost along

the way. For the most part, there was little overlap in the answers I received, but I've grown to find that beautiful instead. We all know that the more you examine people, the more differences you'll see and learn to appreciate, and this thesis has really hammered that thought into me.

I chose to explore this theme in the form of a short documentary because I hope to be a documentarian as a profession. I'm drawn to documentaries because they have flexibility in the way they can show information, but are restricted in telling the most accurate form of the truth, which I find challenging and fascinating. Throughout college, I have realized in all the choices I have made that my main career goal is to tell other people's stories, and documentaries are a perfect way for me to do that. I'm a visual thinker and I know what it takes to edit something into an entertaining product, and those skills easily translate into filmmaking. Moreover, I feel like there is a stigma associated with documentaries that portrays them as stuffy and boring, and it's a personal objective of mine to show that they can be creative and compelling. Hopefully, my thesis helped to prove this point.

The style I have chosen is partly a result of my love for stop motion animation and partly a result of what was necessary to make it visually decent. As I will go into more deeply later, the footage from the earlier interviews I conducted was not up to my normal standards. Therefore, the best thing I could do was cover it up, and since the interviews were so abstract and conceptual by nature, finding "b-roll," or visuals for what they were talking about, was practically impossible. I thought of stop animation as a solution because I had done some briefly for other projects and I love how it

communicates ideas in a way that captures the eye and holds your attention. I think the results of my efforts were fairly good, considering I am not a trained artist by any means.

I got my inspiration not so much from feature-length documentaries but from YouTube videos, podcasts, and Ted Talks. In today's culture, these outlets are a ubiquitous and fast way to get a lot of information and perspective from experts in their fields. They're effective because they don't just provide thoughtful insight, but they put it in layman's terms. Difficult concepts like Europe's terror networks and the Panama Papers can be understood more easily if they are talked about by the people for the people. So much of journalism today irks me because it seems like the media makes little effort to break up difficult concepts into simple language. I think that's a large contributor to the apathy people feel toward current events. As I delved deeper into the questions I asked my subjects, I tried to stick to this steadfast rule as much as I could. Yes, I want my thesis to invoke deeper thinking, but I also want it to be something that can quickly communicate ideas. I wanted to stay away from any type of complicated storytelling that would intimidate or discourage my audience.

As far as specific examples I used for my thesis goes, *Soul Pancake*, a book-turned-YouTube channel, was a great tool to get me started, based on the content they put out. They have a series of videos called "Man on a Street," where they ask people off the street the same question and compile the answers into a short, three-minute video. The topics they choose are always interesting, including things like "What holiday is the world missing?" and "How do you get lost?" Watching videos like these planted the seed for the types of questions I would end up asking my subjects throughout the project. Instead of sticking to basic, by-the-book questions, I thought of other things like "If I

were to hook you up to a heart monitor during your creative process, what would it look like?" I wasn't sure how people would respond to such a strange request, but everyone was intrigued by it and gave me thoughtful answers. As for podcasts and Ted Talks, I listened to about one a day for three months, and they naturally seeped into my thinking when I was working on this project. There were a lot of interviews with directors and comedians that struck a chord with me, like one with comedian, Demetri Martin, who does a lot of illustration jokes. He said that he makes himself work on jokes for at least thirty minutes a day, and setting that small goal makes working even longer less of a commitment. Based off of this, I ended up asking my interviewees if they had a similar process, to which I got varying and interesting responses. Overall, I would say that although these influences do not necessarily have the same look as my product, they were integral to my process and led to my best questions.

The process of creating this documentary has taught me more life skills than it would have if I had done the same project through the TCOM department. I had to shift my focus from a technical standpoint to other things, like asking the right questions and making sure to get personality in every answer. This was sometimes successful, sometimes not so much. If I were simply doing a video project for my major, all of my attention would have been on achieving the right look and style in a visual sense. I wouldn't have planned as much in the way of questions and I would not have had such a clear objective in mind. I'm not saying my professors haven't highlighted these things as important, but they've never really gone into detail about the work that goes into it. I've learned that it takes a certain kind of brainpower to go from looking at the visuals objectively to talking to the subjects in an interpersonal manner. Furthermore, I would

not have gone to such lengths to get the particular people I interviewed because the focus would have been more on the way the content was presented than the actual content. This may seem like a harsh critique of the telecommunications department, but they definitely put the technical aspects in the foreground, and rightfully so.

This leads to my first major roadblock: asking people to be in my documentary. As an introvert, it's already difficult for me to approach people I don't know, but to ask them for such a big favor seemed impossible in my mind. However, I knew it had to be done, so after about two weeks of procrastination, practice, and preparation, I asked my first subject, Dom Caristi, for his participation. He is a telecommunications professor who concentrates mostly on teaching media ethics and law. I wanted to interview him specifically after participating in a workshop he gave my immersive learning class about the definition of creativity. I won't go into great detail, but it involved making sandwiches. I thought it was extremely clever, so he was on the top of my list as a candidate for this documentary. After my quick elevator pitch, he enthusiastically agreed, and I couldn't have been more relieved. This affirmation made everyone afterward much easier to approach – even the ones I had never met before. Still, I had to give myself a little pep talk before interacting with each person. It also forced me to construct a system for what to do when I approached people. I found that the best method was to introduce myself briefly, then explain why I chose to speak with them specifically. I was very complimentary and made sure that I wasn't taking up too much of their time, and I think that was vital for their agreement. Once I started talking about my project and why I was doing it, I think they saw the passion I had and trusted that I wouldn't waste their time. It pays off when you love what you do.

Although I could have chosen anyone to be in my documentary and it would have had the same general effect, I consciously chose people who I thought would both give thoughtful answers and be good on screen. I know that the purpose of my thesis prioritizes the first of these requirements, but nothing takes away the validity of someone's words quite like someone uncomfortable on camera. That's one thing I have learned in my years in the telecommunications department. Dom Caristi was a no-brainer because I knew he had experience teaching creativity and as a telecommunications professor, he knew how to behave on camera. Similarly, the acting majors I interviewed were also an easy choice, based on their experience both with making something out of nothing and acting for the camera. After going to a talk Jill Christman gave about her writing process, she went directly onto my dream list of interviewees. She had so much to say about strategies to create and how she's turned tragedy into artistic expression... I had to ask her to be a part of my thesis. And although she didn't know who I was, she consented, as well. In contrast to that, Mike Prater was a shot in the dark. I knew I wanted a professional from the art world to make an appearance, so I asked my advisor and he threw out that name. Without even knowing what he looked like, I approached him about it, and using my tried and true method of being brief and to-the-point, he graciously agreed. Another person I included was Brianna Lisak, who I thought could offer an interesting perspective based on her recent experience student teaching at a middle school in Anderson. I think her personality gave way to a bit of humor that my documentary was lacking before.

Another detail that I really tried to think through during preproduction was the diversity of my subjects. I've seen too many documentaries, films, and TV shows that

have presented primarily white males, so I wanted to break that unfortunate trend and make sure to include more women and people of color. I reached out to the Ethnic Theatre Alliance, an organization that has committed itself to exploring cultures, minorities, and social justice, and asked if they had anyone to spare for an interview. After a little waiting (which was torture, considering the sudden increase in work I had to complete), I was able to interview two young women, Abi Mitchell and Kelsey Johnson, who filled that void and gave amazing answers. Furthermore, I interviewed a creative writing major, Daniel Brount, who talked a lot about being gay and accepting the responsibility of being a spokesperson for the LGBTQ community, which added yet another diverse point of view.

What I've learned from these people is vast. Although I didn't use the majority of my footage in the final product, I value everything they said. Even at the times I didn't agree. From the start, I could tell that Dom's interview would be different from the others. I found it challenging to get him to talk about himself and stray away from the theory he was reciting – very eloquently, I might add. I appreciated listening to all the research he had done about creativity and the fact that he took the time to explain it, but most of his interview proved to be ineffective in the final version of my thesis. Furthermore, at one point, he said that a person couldn't judge his or her own creativity; an outsider is the only true judge. I don't agree with that at all, but I found it very interesting that he held onto that notion. I was most excited about everything Daniel Brount, the creative writing student, had to say. He concisely expressed his process in a way that was different from the others because he said it from such a selfless perspective. He is determined to make other people's lives better through his writing, and I couldn't

get enough of what he was saying. I'd never thought of doing things like patting my head and rubbing my stomach to generate ideas, but Jill Christman has convinced me that it's something I should try. Every one of them had something unique and thought provoking to say, and I am forever grateful that they gave up their time to be in my thesis.

Though I kept many film production concerns high on the list, the way I prioritized things was very different from a regular video project, and it definitely shows in the final product. This unexpected change in concentration worked to my detriment in some ways, unfortunately, because the visuals were not up to my usual standards. This was partly due to the lack of help I had, and partly due to an unfortunate occurrence that happened at the end of March. Without extra hands during the filming process, it was easy to become overwhelmed with the strict time limits I often had in addition to all of the little details I had to keep track of. The thought that I was an inconvenience to my interviewees never left my mind when I was filming, so I tried to be as efficient as possible, which often led to sloppy work. Looking back, I should have been more at ease – after all, everyone told me how excited they were about what I was doing. I wasn't a drain on their time, I was asking them to be a part of a really cool thing. That's something I wish I would have kept in mind, but it's hard to keep that perspective when you're in the moment.

There was one event in particular that drastically set me back during the completion of this project. After most of my filming was done, my external hard drive inexplicably crashed, erasing and damaging the majority of my interviews. This was a rough patch unlike any other I have ever experienced on a project, and it took me a while to get back on my feet. After waiting a week for the technology department to recover all

the files they could, I got back to work, only to discover that most of the videos I got back were from the B-camera, meaning they were backup shots meant only to provide continuity between cuts. As I was by myself for all of the shoots, the B-camera was set up much less carefully than it normally would have been and the audio from it wasn't half as good. But it was the only footage I had, so I did the best I could with it.

Another, more indirect result of this unfortunate event was the toll it took on me psychologically. I was pretty miserable for a couple of weeks after it happened, as to be expected. It was hard for me to think about continuing the project when all I could think about was how all of my hard work had disappeared. What if it happened again, somehow? It seemed inevitable in the state I was in. Plus, I had discovered that all the material I did have was of lesser quality, and damaged to boot. It isn't easy to motivate yourself when you're unhappy with what you're working with. Eventually, though, I knew I had to get this project done, if only for my own sanity, so I made a game plan and got back to work. What really got me through was the thought that I could cover up a lot of the bad footage with illustrations, and once I started making them, it was a lot of fun. They were mostly visual representations of the abstract ideas my subjects were explaining as part of their processes. One example is the illustration of Mike Prater, the art education professor's technique for coming up with ideas. He said he was a "build and destroy" type of artist, so to demonstrate that point, I drew a building being constructed and then exploding with the help of TNT. Most of the illustrations were very literal translations of quotes from my subjects, which I think adds to the wry, easy-to-understand style that I developed throughout the editing process.

Besides that evident and overarching roadblock, another struggle I had during this semester-long process was finding the balance between the filming process, being present with my interviewees, and covering all the bases with my questions. There were so many technical things alone that I had to keep track of: I had to make sure the framing and focus was good on camera, the levels were sufficient in the audio, and that my subject looked decent as far as fly-away hairs and posture was concerned. Consequently, something had to give, and to my disappointment it was the technical side of the project. This was a blow to my ego in many ways, mostly because filming is what I want to do as a profession. Not being perfect at it with such an important project at hand was discouraging. I had to face the truth that although I had been studying production for four years, I still had a lot to learn before I would be on the level I thought I was already at. No matter how much practice I had before this project, I still needed more, and that scared me. I was thinking, "I have to start applying for real-world jobs soon, and I can't even shoot a basic interview." I began to doubt myself so much that I had to take a break from my thesis for a while, just to regain some confidence. When I worked on other video projects for class, I started to make progress in my shooting style, largely due to all the practice (and failed attempts) from my thesis. Although I wasn't satisfied with it, it allowed me to grow with other projects, which makes the setbacks worth it.

After a while, a solution to all of the bad footage I had was clear: I could have easily asked for help. I regret that I did not reach out to anyone, but I think my ego was in the way. For one thing, I wanted to prove to myself that I could handle making a documentary independently, as that is what I intend on doing as soon as I graduate. Upon reflection, that seems like a foolish endeavor. I know now that one person can't do the

job of ten, no matter how skilled they are. I was thinking in terms of who and what I would have access to after I graduated, and I assumed I wouldn't have many people to rely on. After everything I've gone through this semester though, I've begun to actively reach out to people who would want to work with me, with positive results. Asking for help has always been hard, but I think this thesis has beaten that out of me. I had it stuck in my head that whomever came to my assistance would be getting practically nothing out of the process. I know now that I probably could have asked a plethora of my friends and they wouldn't have minded giving up a couple of hours here and there to give me hand, but at the time it seemed like a much bigger commitment. Looking back, I should have just swallowed my pride and reached out to someone.

There were several ways in which this process has spurred on personal growth. The most important thing it strengthened in me was my confidence and ability to ask perfect strangers to do this generous thing – to sacrifice their time and energy on a student thesis. This was invaluable experience because it's a necessary skill in my profession, not to mention a priceless life skill. As I said before, it took a couple of weeks to really work up the courage and gain momentum, but after pounding the pavement and talking to so many people, I don't feel any hesitation in talking to people about the next project I decide to do. Also, I think it goes without saying, but it really helped me develop a way to deal with stress and outward defeat. I've never lost so much footage before, and it forced me to cultivate a strategy to put aside my emotions and continue with a strong and well-composed work ethic. Moreover, this may be obvious, but since the Big Data Loss of 2016, I've been backing up all my footage in at least two different locations. That is never happening to me again, to be sure.

My thesis has also strengthened my decision to pursue filmmaking as my main profession. In a way, it has even helped me identify my desire to study it further in graduate school. Before I started this project, I was playing around with the idea of going to film school after graduation, but never as a serious option. However, when I struggled so much with the logistics of shooting and being without a crew, I realized that graduate school would provide the lessons and people I need to be a better filmmaker. Plus, with this project under my belt, I could use it as a sample of my work when I do apply to schools, which will be after taking a year off to further expand my résumé.

While the end product is largely imperfect, I think that speaks for the creative process itself. It's messy and unreliable, and if I were to count how many times it's taken me in a completely different direction I'd run out of fingers. If I've learned anything from this project and the interviews within it, it's that you're never really going to be satisfied with the end product. That's not really what creativity is about. It's about the process and the rises and falls that come with that. You can't predict what's going to work and what's going to fail; the best you can do is keep creating and learning from your mistakes. In the same vein, I hope that it is evident through the diversity of subjects, questions, and ideas that creativity isn't a talent that a person either has or doesn't. Creativity is in everyone, and everyone has the responsibility to do something about it.